

VZCZCXRO8397
PP RUEHPA RUEHTRO
DE RUEHNK #0366/01 1531350
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021350Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8478
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1030
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0681
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 2223
RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE 0251
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0089
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0614
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0696
RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAHINGEN GE
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAHINGEN GE
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0690
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1139
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000366

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2019

TAGS: [ECON](#) [EFIS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: JUNTA GIVING AWAY FOOD IN FINAL EFFORT TO GAIN
SUPPORT

REF: 08 NOUAKCHOTT 709

Classified By: Ambassador Mark Boulware for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In a thinly veiled attempt to gain public support, the junta is once again giving away food and land. Local mayors are distributing free fish to their constituents, likely on behalf of the junta. The "Prime Minister" and "Food Security Commissioner" oversaw the distribution of 2160 tons of food in Nouakchott and 5347 tons of food and animal feed in rural areas. Contrary to the junta's claims that the recipients were carefully identified based on need, the distributions were chaotic scenes of people scrambling for whatever they could get. This round of giveaways came after several months of relatively little such activity by the junta, suggesting that it was saving what few resources and options it had left for a final effort to consolidate popular support before the elections. End Summary.

12. (C) As the June 6 elections rapidly approach, the junta is once again trying to gain support from the masses by giving away food and land. The junta first used giveaways and other measures to help consumers in an effort to consolidate popular support in the first months following the coup (reftel). Although the junta had stopped giveaways for several months, likely due to a lack of financial resources, it has started once again in an effort to ensure Gen. Aziz's victory in the upcoming elections. The giveaways this time around are limited to food and a small amount of land. As the junta took the low-hanging fruit and used what resources it had just after the coup, it likely has fewer options available to it this time. Nevertheless, it is doing all that it can with what resources it still has available.

13. (U) Six to eight months after the initial giveaways and other measures to help consumers, not all have gone as well as intended. The traditional fishing industry continues to suffer from the junta's attempt to lower domestic prices for seafood by banning the export of several species of fish. Not surprisingly, USAID's Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) shows a strong increase in food insecurity among traditional fishermen and their families living along the coast. Shortages of butane used for cooking continue after the junta lowered resale prices without lowering

wholesale prices for distributors. While the junta mandated that bread would be sold for 90 UM (\$0.33) per loaf instead of the usual 100 UM (\$0.37), bakeries refuse to sell bread at the lower price.

¶4. (C) The most recent giveaways are aimed at Mauritania's poorest populations, who Aziz appears to be targeting as his base. There are reports from many towns and villages in southern Mauritania that municipal governments are giving away fish to the local populations. In this highly centralized country where towns and villages have very little authority and resources, it is highly unlikely that mayors in southern towns acted independently to purchase and distribute fish. The more likely scenario is that the junta provided the fish to the mayors and instructed them to distribute it.

¶5. (C) The junta began a new round of food distribution May 23 in Nouakchott. It distributed 2160 tons of foodstuffs to 40,000 families. Each family was supposed to receive 50 kg of rice and 4 kg of dates. The junta estimates that the total cost is 350 million UM (\$1.3 million). The rice and dates distributed by the junta were purchased domestically by the "Prime Minister" at the end of the 2008 harvest. The junta also began a program to distribute foodstuffs to rural populations May 24. The Food Security Commission intends to distribute 4000 tons of wheat, 804 tons of animal feed, and 402 tons of cooking oil to 141 rural towns and villages. The source and price of the goods intended for rural distribution are unclear. However, as Mauritania produces almost no wheat, animal feed or oil domestically, they most certainly

NOUAKCHOTT 00000366 002 OF 002

came from abroad. The two most likely sources are either a gift from Qadhafi during his March visit or purchases made by one or more of the leading businessmen known to support Aziz and made available to the junta on favorable terms. During Qadhafi's visit, EmbOffs witnessed large transport trucks parked all around the airport piled high with goods. These were most likely goods that Qadhafi flew in with him as he is known to do when traveling abroad. Post has not received any reports about these goods being sold or distributed previously, so they may be what the junta is distributing currently.

¶6. (C) In the junta's official press release about the food distributions, it noted that "the recipient families have been selected by a commission made up of administrative and municipal authorities and staff from the Food Security Commission in the targeted zones. Strict and transparent criteria were applied to give priority to the poorest families." The junta's statement is in contrast to the mass and often chaotic crowds that LES witnessed around distribution points. While the Food Security Commission has a fairly well developed network of feeding centers and stores where it sells subsidized food products to those in need, this system was not used to distribute the goods. A contact within the Food Security Commission confirmed that there were no criteria or priorities established or families identified before the distribution began. It appears that food was given away rather haphazardly on a first come, first served basis.

¶7. (U) "Prime Minister" Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf inaugurated a new project to provide land to 16,750 residents of Nouadhibou. The government is making 175 hectares available. The land distribution is supposed to target the most vulnerable population, those that do not currently have formal land titles. The total cost is estimated by the junta to be approximately 900 million UM (\$3.3 million).

¶8. (U) Gen. Aziz's campaign has also been giving away food and other necessities to try to gain support. Since May 23, the campaign has been giving away 60-100 boxes per day containing 2 kg of rice, a bottle of cooking oil, and 1000 UM (\$3.70) to residents of Nouadhibou. It has also been distributing 30 medical kits and 30 school kits per day.

Each box of food, medical and school kit is covered with pictures of Aziz. Media reports state that recipients promise to vote for Aziz in return for the donation.

19. (C) Comment: The junta continues to do what it can to gain public support for itself and its candidate, Gen. Aziz, ahead of the elections. It has done little to try to give the appearance of neutrality in the upcoming elections. Its press release went as far as to say "the beneficiaries of the operation reaffirmed their support for the national choices and renewed their confidence in the state after the rectification of August 6, 2008." While the junta is doing what it can with what it has, its dwindling resources are apparent. The giveaways this time around were much more modest than the first round, limited to the food stocks that the junta had on hand. The junta's continued preference for measures to gain short-term support is also evident in that it continues to give away commodities rather than selling them to fund longer term development or agricultural projects. End comment.
BOULWARE